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Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism,
Nonproliferation and Trade**

“U.S. Strategy for Countering Jihadist Websites”

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"The average Muslim does not need to go to Afghanistan or Pakistan in order to attend training camps and learn how to fight the American enemy. Likewise, he does not need to be an expert or professional in making bombs and explosives to attack the U.S., as a bomb can easily be made using readily available materials such as nitrate, fertilizers that are sold in stores, agricultural materials, and a few canisters of gas and benzene.

"Anyone can obtain these materials and make a bomb. Anyone can learn how to do it by searching the Internet and watching videos that explain how to make bombs from readily available materials – and then plant it in a pre-planned location, and detonate it with a remote device or a cellular phone, without leaving any traces behind him.

"Anyone can obtain a firearm and open fire on a military base or an FBI or police headquarters, or on [the Capitol building], the Pentagon, the White House, or any other place. This can be done by a man, woman, child, student, teacher, university professor, doctor, lawyer, or anyone [else]."

- A post on the jihadist website Al-Shumukh by "Shamikh Muharrid," from a document titled "Woe to America: New Jihad Fighters That Intelligence Apparatus Cannot Trace." May 13, 2010

Chairman Sherman, Ranking Member Royce, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to serve as a panelist on this important topic.

A Journey from Extremism to Liberalism

My name is Mansour Al-Hadj. My parents are Muslims from Chad, but I was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, less than a mile from the Grand Mosque. I grew up in Jeddah and went to elementary school and middle school there. I spent my high school years in Chad. The following year I traveled to Sudan, where I got a degree in Sharia and Islamic Studies at the International University of Africa.

I came to the United States five years ago, after winning what was essentially a Green Card lottery. About two years ago, I started working for MEMRI, and today I am director of its Reform in the Arab and Muslim World project. My work involves focusing on liberal voices and advocates of reform in the Arab and Muslim world, including those speaking out against online jihad. One notable example includes Al-Arabiya TV director-general Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, one of the most esteemed voices in the Arab media, who stated that there is a need "to wage war against extremist websites in general, which have become larger camps than the first camp that gave its name to the 'Al Qaeda' organization."

I was raised an observant Muslim. In school I was taught to hate America, the West, Jews, and Christians. In Koran school I was taught to love jihad and those who wage jihad for the sake of Allah. What really turned me into an extremist were the tapes of religious sermons that I would listen to – distributed at no charge by the Koran school – and the Islamic pamphlets that I would read. Most of them extolled the courage of the Arab and Afghan *mujahideen* who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan, and described the miracles they had witnessed on the battlefield. I also would listen to Islamic songs ("Anasheed Islamiyah") bemoaning the sorry state of the Muslims worldwide, extolling the virtues of jihad and martyrdom, and depicting the West as the cause of every problem and catastrophe in the Muslim world.

During this period of my youth, I longed to discover the true Islam, and I was troubled by an apparent paradox: If we Muslims have the Koran, which guides us in the path of truth and righteousness, how is it that we are so backward? The songs and books gave me an answer: they taught me that we Muslims are backward because we do not follow the directives of Islam and the Sunna – the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and customs – and do not implement the Sharia - Islam's sacred law – as the Prophet Muhammad did.

After graduating from university in Sudan, I returned to Saudi Arabia. I was confused and had many questions about Islam and its role in my life. But I was afraid to ask because I was taught that a true believer never questions Allah.

My transformation came after reading an article by nonviolent activist Dr. Khaled Jalabi. In that article, he said that God gave us a mind so that we could think and could seek answers for everything – including for the existence of God Himself. At that moment all my fears vanished, and I became a completely different person. I wanted to read about everything, and I began turning every answer back into a question.

I was fascinated by Dr. Jalabi's denunciation of violence and his support for the use of nonviolent tactics for instituting change. It was my admiration for Dr. Jalabi and for others like him that brought me to MEMRI.

MEMRI's Democratization in the Arab and Muslim World Project, of which I am director, provides Arab and Muslim reformists with a platform from which they can reach out to their societies and to religious, political, and educational leaders while also providing Western policy makers with a solid basis for long-term strategic plans aimed at supporting this effort.

Today, I see many Muslims trapped in the same sense of conflict and paradox in which I myself was once trapped – especially young Muslims in all parts of the world, even here in the U.S. The difference today is that Muslims now have many, many more opportunities to access the writings and songs that were the source of my extremist ideas. They are readily available online at jihadist forums and websites. These are powerful magnets for Muslims, especially young Muslims, who are looking for answers.

Based on my own experience and research, I know that these jihadi websites and forums are very effective at recruiting Muslims to their cause of reviving the glory of Islam and the lost Islamic Caliphate. Along with other media in the Muslim world, they campaign intensively against the U.S. and the West – presenting both as the eternal enemies of the Muslims, as satanic force conspiring against the Muslims and against their most precious asset – their Islamic faith.

The Role of Jihadist Websites

Jihadist forums and websites have played a role in several recent terrorist acts in the U.S. Major Nidal Hasan, the sole suspect in the November 2009 Fort Hood shootings, allegedly found ideas and encouragement on jihadist websites offering advice and instructions for perpetrating deadly attacks. Faisal Shahzad, the failed Times Square bombing suspect, may have put together his car bomb following the detailed instructions available on the forums.

These websites also post information on power stations, nuclear plants, and other sensitive potential targets for devastating attacks, as well as manuals for building explosive belts and bombs using readily available materials. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula publishes an online magazine called *Inspire*; its most recent issue included instructions for making a bomb in a home kitchen, and guidance in how to kill as many people as possible when carrying out attacks in public places. That issue also included an article in English by the American-Yemeni sheikh Anwar Al-Awlaki; in it, he asked Muslims in America, especially those serving in the military: "How can you be loyal to an administration that is waging war against Islam and the Muslims?"

Two examples from this week show the very real danger posed by these terrorist websites. A member of the Islamist forum Shumukh Al-Islam posted Google Earth images of the U.S. military base in Djibouti, saying that "a trusted source" had provided him with information about

the base's exact location. The images, he said, were a gift for the Somali jihad group Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen. Second, a post on Al-Shumukh called on motivated Muslims in the U.S. to carry out martyrdom operations, such as suicide bombings, and showed how to make a car bomb similar to that used by Faisal Shahzad at Times Square. As part of MEMRI's ongoing support to the U.S. government and military, this information was provided to all interested parties.

I have personally witnessed the powerful effect a media campaign can have on young minds. During my student years in Sudan there was an ongoing war being fought between the Muslim government and the Christian insurgents in the south. The government recruited thousands of students to fight the insurgents, among them many of my friends and teachers; some of them would later lose their lives in the fighting. One government recruitment effort was a jihadist TV series called "In the Arenas of Martyrdom," that aired on state-run TV every Friday night. This show documented jihad fighters imparting their love for jihad, discussing their courageous deeds, and telling of the miracles they had witnessed on the battlefield. I still remember how fascinated I – and hundreds of my fellow students and millions of viewers around the world – were fascinated by their stories: a story of a fighter whose body did not decay after he was killed; another from whose blood a perfume-like fragrance wafted; a third whom the Prophet Muhammad visited in a dream; a fourth who saw angels fighting alongside the *mujahideen*; and a fifth who became invisible to the enemies after he recited a verse from the Koran. How I wept as I listened to the testimonies of these young men – each of whom was designated a "martyr" – and how I longed to become one of them! [You can see many such examples of Arab governments inciting to jihad on the website of MEMRI's TV Monitor Project at www.memritv.org]

This particular TV series, produced by the Sudanese government at considerable cost, persuaded thousands to join the Popular Defense Forces in order to achieve one of two desirable goals: either victory or martyrdom for the sake of Allah. Some may not realize what it means to see and hear a young man committing his last testimony to video before embarking on a martyrdom operation. I know how powerful these testimonies are, and what they mean to each and every Muslim, especially the youth.

Just as the Sudanese government managed to "market" the war in the South to recruit thousands to join the jihad there, terror organizations, especially Al-Qaeda, are actively recruiting thousands through the Internet, and persuading them to support and join the jihad. The method and means are the same – and so are the results.

In fact, Al-Qaeda and other jihad organizations consider their online activity to be an integral part of their jihad, and invest tremendous resources in it. Online and media activities are referred to as *al-jihad al-'alami* ("media jihad"). In one of his recordings, Al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri praised those who engage in online jihadist activity, saying: "To the knights of the jihadi media I say: May Allah reward you the best reward for you good job in serving Islam. You must know that you are [fighting] on a great front of Islam, and that the tyrants [of our time] are very disturbed by your efforts..."¹

The Internet – Essential to the Global Jihad Movement

It is impossible to imagine the development of the global jihad movement and the ongoing terrorism (and not just in the U.S.) without the Internet. The Internet has catapulted this primitive and murderous ideology right into the 21st century. Imagine a caveman emerging from his cave with the latest and most sophisticated missile launcher mounted on his shoulder. This actually happened – and the Afghan jihad managed to defeat the Soviet Union.

The Internet is likewise a sophisticated weapon in the hands of the global jihad, with which it gravely threatens the West, particularly the U.S. It is so vital for the global jihad that it has become an area of jihad in and of itself – electronic jihad.

Islamists consider their online activity as an integral part of their jihad, and therefore invest tremendous material and other resources in it. In fact, online media or information activities are referred to as *al-jihad al-da'wi* ("propaganda jihad") or *al-jihad al-i'lami* ("media jihad"). This concept is based on the well-known Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: "One who sees a wrong must correct it with his hand, and if he cannot, then with his tongue, and if he cannot, then in his heart, and this is the weakest level of faith.")

Islamist websites operate out of various countries, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and their target audience includes countries and communities all over the world. Accordingly, the websites come in various languages – from Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and Turkish to Western languages such as English and French. These sites tend to be ephemeral – every day new ones appear and others close down, or are shut down.

The online jihad activity of Islamist organizations takes numerous forms. Hacking Western government and commercial websites is a way of waging economic and ideological warfare against those whom they designate as their enemies. Online military training for jihad fighters includes weaponry handbooks, battle tactics training, information on explosives, and more. For example, the military committee of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula publishes an electronic military journal, *Mu'askar Al-Battar* (The Al-Battar Training Camp). Some websites offer entire courses on explosives manufacturing, and guides for making explosives and even homemade dirty bombs.

However, what Islamist organizations use the Internet for the most is spreading their messages and propaganda. They consider this effort to be vitally important, and pour considerable resources into it; it comprises the majority of such organizations' online activity.

Prominent terrorists play an active role in these organizations' online media activities. For example, the perpetrator of the December 2009 Khost CIA base bombing, Jordanian terrorist Humam Al-Balawi (Abu Dajana Al-Khorasani), was a writer and supervisor on the Al-Hesbah forum, which served as the main jihadist forum until it was shut down.

The Solution

Through our research of jihadi websites, we at MEMRI discovered something very interesting – so interesting that we wrote a series of reports on it. One major issue in these reports is that many jihadist websites are hosted by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that are not aware of the content that they are hosting.² We also reported on anti-Muslim incitement on the Internet³.

In order to fight the spread of extremism on the internet, in July 2007 we addressed Congress at an event titled "The Enemy Within: Where are the Islamist/Jihadist Websites Hosted and What Can Be Done About It." We suggested one way to begin dealing with the problem: notifying ISPs in the U.S. of just what it is that they host, in the hope they would voluntarily remove the sites. Two Members of Congress, Representatives Gary Ackerman (D-NY) and Mike Pence (R-IN), sponsored the bi-partisan event, and spoke about the important issue of Islamist websites and the threat they represent against America. Both Congressmen called on ISPs in the U.S. to stop working in the service of global jihad. In the two weeks following the event, 32 of the 50 ISP companies questioned removed the jihadi sites from on their servers.

As a result of the briefing's success, MEMRI founded its Civil Action for a Jihad-Free Internet initiative, whose stated purpose is to notify ISPs that some of the sites they host may be considered a threat to national security. To our way of thinking, the exposure itself is an effective measure against extremist websites.

The Civil Action for a Jihad-Free Internet committee is made up of current and former Members of Congress, administration officials, intelligence community officials, Nobel laureates, and others. The group's purpose is to notify Internet Service Providers of the content they are hosting; hopefully, the ISPs, in turn, will remove it out of concern for national security.

Opposition to the Civil Action for a Jihad-Free Internet came in several varieties. One argument concerned First Amendment rights – although wiping out Internet jihad actually has nothing to do with freedom of speech. The U.S. criminal code bars the provision of communications services to any designated terrorist organization. Opponents in government who thought that the criminal code did not apply in this case should have given the Supreme Court a chance to rule on the matter.

A second argument is that these websites are a source of valuable intelligence, and therefore should be permitted. This, however, is totally inaccurate; these websites are for ideological recruitment, but provide no actionable intelligence. This argument was put forward, not surprisingly, by contractors who make their living by keeping these sites going.

A third argument concerns the "impossibility" of dealing with the huge number of these websites – presumably, if they are shut down by ISPs in the U.S., they will reemerge hosted by other ISPs, under new names and new URLs. But this too is invalid. First, despite the large number of jihadist websites, forums and blogs, we believe that only a few hundred, and perhaps even fewer, are the actual fonts from which the incitement flows – and that the rest are just reposting their content. We believe that if we can stop those key jihadi websites from operating, the rest of them will dry up.

The Fight Against Online Jihad Today

Cooperation among states and regimes, whether Western democratic or non-Western non-democratic, has developed considerably in recent years. Non-Western and non-democratic regimes are no less threatened than the West by global jihad and local jihad movements, and they have a vested interest in fighting online jihad. In the event that any country refuses to cooperate with a U.S. campaign against online jihad, naming them and focusing on them and their support for terrorism will be an effective tactic.

Most importantly, the number of jihadist websites has decreased in recent years, including those that were once sources and propagators of incitement. Currently, the number of highly dangerous ones is less than 10. Our last investigation through our Jihad & Terrorism Threat Monitor found that a very few important jihadist sites are hosted in the U.S.

One reason for this decline is that despite the arguments about First Amendment rights and possible intelligence value, intelligence services have made headway against online jihad by shutting down sites, and in some cases taking them over completely.

Another reason for the decline is the rivalry and mutual suspicions among some leading jihadist websites.⁴ In addition, Al-Qaeda itself has severely cut down on the number of accredited websites publishing its releases due to this suspicion and paranoia over who is trustworthy.⁵

It is important to mention that terrorist organizations are always on the lookout for other channels and media through which to propagate their recruitment drives, ideological message, propaganda, and ideology. As jihadists encountered increasing difficulties with their websites, they discovered that they could easily turn to Western social media outlets such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. A group named the Internet Jihad Brigades Invasion is an example of such a group using this medium. Their mission is to transfer material to such social networking outlets when difficulties are encountered in posting it on jihadist websites and forums. YouTube is the primary clearinghouse for one of America's most wanted terrorists, Anwar Al-Awlaki. Al-Awlaki provided the spiritual guidance and inspiration for several recent successful and failed terror attacks in the U.S. Major Nidal Hasan, Umar Farooq Abdulmutallab, and Faisal Shahzad have all been shown to have had a connection to Awlaki. As of this writing, over 5,000 videos on YouTube are spreading Awlaki's message of jihad.⁶

Al-Awlaki's presence on YouTube is the result of the shutting down of his website in November 2009, shortly after the Fort Hood shooting. At that time, MEMRI reported that Al-Awlaki's website was hosted by an ISP in California; within two hours of the report's publication, the ISP removed Al-Awlaki's website.⁷

Online jihad is a dangerous foe; the U.S. must confront it exactly as it confronts other forms of extremism on other fronts around the world – both within and beyond its borders. As with its military ventures, in order for this effort to bear fruit, the U.S. must initiate cooperation with its allies and with international organizations.

Experience shows that this can indeed be done.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my opening remarks. Thank you again for inviting me today. I welcome any questions that you or the Members may have.

*Please note that MEMRI's staff is always available to answer questions or assist Congress in any way needed.

¹ Rajab 1431 (June-July 2010). Produced by Al-Qaeda's media wing, Al-Sahab, and posted on jihadist websites July 19, 2010.

² See: MEMRI Special Report No. 31, "Islamist Websites and Their Hosts Part I: Islamist Terror Organizations," July 16, 2004, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/1174.htm>; MEMRI Special Report No. 35, "Islamist Websites and their Hosts Part II: Clerics," November 11, 2004, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/1257.htm>; MEMRI JTTM No. 374, "The Enemy Within: Where Are the Islamist/Jihadist Websites Hosted, and What Can Be Done About It?," July 19, 2007, <http://www.memrijttm.org/content/en/report.htm?report=2300>.

³ See MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis No. 385, "Islamophobia and Jihad on Video-Sharing Websites(1): Islamophobic Videos on YouTube," September 7, 2007, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/2369.htm>; MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis No. 417, "Burning The Koran on YouTube: Islamophobia on Video-Sharing Websites (II)," January 30, 2008, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/2520.htm>.

⁴ See MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis No. 625, "Tension, Suspicion Among Jihadi Websites Following Infiltration, Collapse of Several Sites," July 14, 2010, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/50/4449.htm>; MEMRI JTTM No. 275, "Al-Tajdeed Versus Al-Hesbah: Islamist Websites & the Conflict Between Rival Arab & Muslim Political Forces," May 17, 2006, <http://www.memrijttm.org/content/en/report.htm?report=1691¶m=IDTA>.

⁵ See MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis No. 625 "Tension, Suspicion Among Jihadi Websites Following Infiltration, Collapse of Several Sites," July 14, 2010, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/50/4449.htm>.

⁶ See MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis No. 576, "Deleting Online Jihad and the Case of Anwar Al-Awlaki: Nearly Three Million Viewings of Al-Awlaki's YouTube Videos – Included Would-Be Christmas Airplane Bomber, Fort Hood Shooter, 7/7 London Bomber, and Would-Be Fort Dix Bombers," December 30, 2009, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/3871.htm>.

⁷See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 2638, "U.S.-Born Yemen-Based Imam Anwar Al-Awlaki on His CA-Hosted Website: Fort Hood Shooter 'Nidal Hassan Is A Hero,'" November 9, 2009, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/3776.htm>.